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ABSTRACT

Changes have occurred in the geographic concentrations of elderly people in the United States between 1950 and 1970. The paper examines these trends and identifies the factors which influenced them. Census data from 1950 and 1970 were analyzed as a basis for the study. In 1950, 8.1% of the population was classified as older. States with high percentages of the elderly population included New Hampshire, Vermont, Iowa, and Maine. On the county level, areas in New England, the Midwest, and the Eastern Great Plains had high elderly concentrations. In 1970, 9.9% of the population was classified as older. Florida, Iowa, Nebraska, and Arkansas had high concentrations, as did counties in nonmetropolitan areas of the Great Plains and Midwest. A combination of two factors accounted for these changes: out-migration of young people, leaving higher percentages of elderly people; and in-migration of elderly people, such as into Florida. Many more retired people in 1970 were financially able to relocate than people of the same age had been in 1950. This was due to the advent of retirement plans, private pension funds, inflation of property values, and increased Social Security payments. (AV)

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CHANGING DISTRIBUTION OF OLDER AMERICANS: 1950-1970

APR 24

by

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Older persons are one of the largest and fastest growing minorities in the United States.[1] During the Twentieth Century the number of elderly Americans has increased more than seven fold and the percentage of U. S. population aged 65 and older has increased from 4.1% to 10.5% during the same period. If birth and death rates remain at their present level for the rest of this century, about 30 million Americans or about 12% of the population will be classified as older in the year 2000.

The economic importance of the elderly group has increased dramatically in recent decades. Although many older Americans are still forced to survive on sub-poverty level incomes, many more are enjoying a relatively affluent old age. The advent of retirement plans, private pension funds, deferred profit sharing plans, inflation of property values, and increase in Social Security payments over the past several decades have contributed to the rising affluence of this group.

Elderly migration, coupled with the growing numbers of older persons, has increased the importance of this age cohort in many areas. The population structure of certain states and entire regions have been significantly altered, and transfer payments to retirees have become a major source of basic income in some areas of the United States. At the same time, some communities are beginning to experience the increased solcial services costs associated with aged populations. Older Americans are often designated as a group needing special public assistance so that aging in America has become an issue occupying the increased attention of the general public, academicians, and public officials.[2] The number and scope of governmental programs designed to ameliorate problems confronting older persons have expanded rapidly. As the number of older Americans continues to expand in

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both absolute and relative terms, and as their residential mobility is further enhanced, the economic and social impact of the elderly will become even more important.

The purpose of this study is to: 1) describe the spatial patterns of elderly concentrations within the United States in 1950 and 1970, 2) examine changes in these patterns over this time period, and 3) identify the factors responsible for these spatial and temporal patterns.

The spatial patterns of any population are determined by the three basic demographic processes. The components of population change, fertility, mortality, and migration, produce characteristic population age distributions. Because of the decline of immigration to the United States, birth and death rates have assumed prime control of the demographic character of American society. Births increase the size of the younger population; conversely, deaths, when they occur principally in the older age groups, decrease the size of the older cohort. At the regional scale net migration combines with birth and death rates to produce variations in regional population structures.

Migration is selective with respect to age. Demographers traditionally have employed the life cycle or stages in life concept to explain changes in residence.[3] When abrupt changes in career patterns or family structure occur, there is a strong likelihood of a residential move. Changes of residence frequently occur upon graduation, career initiation, marriage, family expansion, promotion, and retirement. Within the major stages of life, career advancement most frequently engenders decisions for long-distance migration. Consequently, explanations of major population shifts traditionally have focused upon differentials in the distribution of economic opportunities. Changing economic and demographic realities necessitate a closer examination of the retirement stage of life. Presumably, retirees have concluded their years of employment and therefore place less emphasis on economic stimuli. Other factors, such as quality of life amenities, should assume paramount importance to older Americans.

Cowgill concluded that "Within the United States, nearly all of the ecological variation in percentages of the aged is due to selective patterns of migration."[4] Two types of migrations produce regional populations with increased concentrations of older persons: 1) in-migration of older people and 2) out-migration of younger persons. Areas possessing retirement amenities attract older persons from a wide geographical area resulting in selective in-migration which produces a local concentration of elderly persons. Conversely, other regions lack the economic opportunities to retain their younger adults. The selective out-migration of younger adults produces a regional concentration of older persons who have "aged in place."[5]

Census data at the state and county levels of aggregation provide the data base for this examination of the distribution of elderly Americans. Two Census years were selected for this study, 1950 and 1970. Data for these two periods are readily comparable and span a sufficient amount of time to allow for the nearly complete replacement of the elderly cohort.[6] The base year, 1950, was selected to provide for the examination of only one generation of elderly people. In addition, the 1950-1970 period experienced comparatively few momentous events such as wars or depressions to affect demographic structures. Maps derived from these data provide the basis of this study.[7]

In 1950, 8.1% of the United States population was classified as older. At the state level, New Hampshire had the highest percentage of elderly population in the nation, 10.8%. Other leading states were Vermont, Iowa, Missouri, and Maine. Conversely, Western and Southern states had relatively few older persons. New Mexico had the lowest percentage of elderly in the nation, 4.9%. Other states with relatively few elderly included South Carolina, North Carolina, Arizona, and Utah.

At the county level, broad areas with high county concentrations of elderly are observed in New England, the Midwest, and the Eastern Great Plains (Figure 1). Peninsular Florida also contains a concentration, although the statewide percentage is not particularly high. Counties in the Southeast and Western portions of the

country are notable for their small older components. The great variability in the percentage of the older cohort in the Western States is probably due to small populations in many of these counties.

Twenty years later the 1970 Census classified 9.9% of the population as elderly, an increase of 1.8%. Florida had acquired the greatest concentration of elderly in the nation with 14.6%. Other states with high percentages of older persons included Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas, and South Dakota. Excluding Alaska and Hawaii, Nevada had the smallest percentage of elderly in the nation with 6.3%. Other states with small elderly proportions included New Mexico, Utah, South Carolina, and Maryland.

At the county level, broad areas of elderly concentration are observed in non-metropolitan portions of the Great Plains and Midwest (Figure 2). Peninsular Florida also has a concentration of older persons. Counties in the Northern Midwest and Appalachia also contain notable concentrations. The West displays a complex pattern of counties with both high and low proportions of the elderly cohort. Although counties with low proportions are scattered throughout the country, clusters are discernable in the South and North Central States.

Between 1950 and 1970, the elderly proportion of the United States population increased from 8.1% to 9.9%. This somewhat modest 1.8 percentage point increase masks a dramatic spatial redistribution. As a region the South experienced the greatest change, as its percentage increased from 6.9 in 1950 to 9.6% in 1970. Although there is some correspondence between the 1950 and 1970 rankings of states based upon their respective proportions of elderly residents, noteworth shifts have occurred. For example, in 1970 Florida led the nation with highest proportion of elderly, but in 1950 it ranked only 21. Other states reporting major increases in their rankings include Arkansas, West Virginia, and South Dakota.

The spatial dimension of these dramatic increases can be portrayed by mapping the changes in the proportions of elderly in county populations occurring between 1950 and 1970. Counties that experienced at least twice the national increase are considered to have had important increases of elderly.[8] Vast portions of non-

metropolitan areas in the Great Plains, Gulf Coastal Plains, and Appalachia report major increases (Figure 3). Notable increases were also recorded in peninsular Florida, and the northern parts of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Scattered groups of counties in the West also had significant growth in their proportions of elderly.

Two processes appear to be responsible for the major increases in county proportions of elderly population. Aging-in-place associated with the selective out-migration of younger cohorts appears to be the dominant process producing most of the large increases in the county percentages of elderly persons between 1950 and 1970. In addition, this same combination of processes seems to be responsible for most county concentrations of elderly persons in both 1950 and 1970. In certain smaller geographical areas the selective in-migration of older cohorts seems to produce concentrations of elderly persons. The relative importance of each of these processes varies both spatially and temporally.

In both 1950 and 1970, vast portions of the non-metropolitan Midwest and Great Plains had high percentages of older persons. In addition, the 1950 distribution displayed high percentages of elderly in non-metropolitan areas of New England. Aging-in-place, in combination with out-migration of younger cohorts, appears to be the dominant process producing these concentrations. These rural areas had possessed limited economic and employment opportunities for a long period, and as such they had experienced long-term out-migration of job-seeking persons. For decades, the cut-over timber areas of New England and the highly mechanized agriculture of the central United States had employed declining numbers of workers. Younger cohorts were leaving these areas in a massive rural-to-urban migration which produced a population structure that had aged-in-place.[9] Because of these demographic shifts, areas experiencing population declines or minimal increases frequently contained high proportions of older people. Correlations of statewide percentages of older persons with statewide percentages of population declines during the previous decade produced significant results. Similarly, these processes are now altering population

structures of impoverished rural areas of the South and Appalachia. Younger cohorts have been migrating from these areas for improved economic opportunities. Although these areas have yet to develop major concentrations of elderly population, they did record major increases in the older percentages between 1950 and 1970.

The uneven increases in the proportion of elderly residing in rural areas of net out-migration suggest that the aging-in-place process does not uniformally affect all regions. In both 1950 and 1970 rural areas of the Midwest and Great Plains had high concentrations of elderly, but the 1970 concentration was notably displaced to the west and south. During this period rapid increases were recorded through the Great Plains, but not extensively in the Midwest. Evidently, the aging-in-place process operates on demographic structures developed during earlier periods. Rapid increases in the elderly percentages appear to lag the period of maximum rural settlement by several decades. The westward drift of the area of great concentration mirrors the earlier settlement sequence. The aging-in-place process is intensified by the out-migration of younger cohorts during this and earlier periods.

Aging-in-place and out-migration are producing population structure variations locally as well as nationally and regionally. Selective migration of younger cohorts from major metropolitan centers is leaving an older, aging-in-place population to reside in the central cities. Already the central city counties of major SMSA's such as New York City and Detroit have experienced visible increases in older population percentages (Figure 3).

Through the process of elderly in-migration, the older cohort is becoming an active participant in the development of certain areas reporting large increases. The small concentration of older persons in peninsular Florida of 1950 has grown to be the greatest concentration in the nation by 1970. Although the 1970 Florida percentage of elderly is high at 14.6%, several peninsular counties have more than 25% of their population aged 65 and older. Charlotte County, located immediately north of Fort Myers, leads the nation with 35% of its population classed as older.

Scattered counties in the Southern and Southwestern states also have acquired high percentages of older persons. Many of these areas have experienced rapid population growth, as large numbers of Americans of all ages have migrated to the Sun Belt.

The effect of the migration of older Americans to retirement areas is much more intense and widespread in 1970 than it was in 1950. Migration upon retirement is a recent phenomenon for all but the wealthiest Americans.[10] The Great Depression and meager retirement benefits had combined to restrict the lifestyle alternatives of most older persons in 1950. By the end of the Great Depression, the financial resources of most Americans had been exhausted. Despite the fact that employment was readily obtained during the 1940's, it seems likely that most older Americans were not able to acquire the resources for a satisfactory retirement by 1950. A decade may not be enough time to obtain the funds for an affluent retirement.

By 1970, the financial circumstances of many older Americans had improved dramatically. The economic advances in the post-World War II period has provided rising incomes, widespread home ownership, and increased retirement benefits. In addition, enhanced mobility, particularly expanding vacation travel, has produced greater awareness of amenity retirement relocation options. These and other factors probably have reinforced retirement concentrations in traditional retirement areas such as Florida and likely have contributed to the emergence of non-traditional retirement areas such as Northern Michigan, the Pacific Northwest, and the Ozarks.

It appears that the migration of older Americans to amenity areas upon retirement is a population redistribution that is just beginning. Only recently have large numbers of elderly been financially able to move upon retirement. Most of the metropolitan areas of the Northeast contain large numbers of Americans approaching retirement age. Rising fuel costs for heating and harsh winters such as the last two should speed this population redistribution.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The terms aged persons, older persons, elderly persons, and retired persons are poorly understood and defined. Elderly person generally refers to people in the later stages of life. Aged and older persons are people that are older than some arbitrary age. Retired person is probably the least satisfactorily defined of these terms. Because of Social Security laws, 65 years of age has become the accepted retirement age in the United States. For the purposes of this paper, the terms aged, older, and elderly refer to persons aged 65 years or older. Large numbers of, but not all retired persons are presumed to be 65 or older.

[2]E. J. Cantilli and J. L. Schmelzer eds.: Transportation and Aging: Selected Issues (Report from the 1970 White House Conference on Aging, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1970).

[3]Peter Rossi: Why Families Move (The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1955); Gerald R. Leslie and Arthur H. Richardson: Life Cycle Pattern and the Decision to Move, in Social Demography (edited by T. R. Ford and G. F. DeJong; Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1970); William Ye and Maurice D. Van Arsdol, Jr.: Residential Mobility, Age, and Life Cycle, Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 32, 1977, pp. 21-31.

[4]Donald O. Cowgill: "The Demography of Aging in the Midwest," in Older People and Their Social World (edited by A. Rose and W. Peterson; F. A. Davis, Philadelphia, 1965), p. 282.

[5]The term aging-in-place denotes the process of cohort transition to increasing age due to residential inertia.

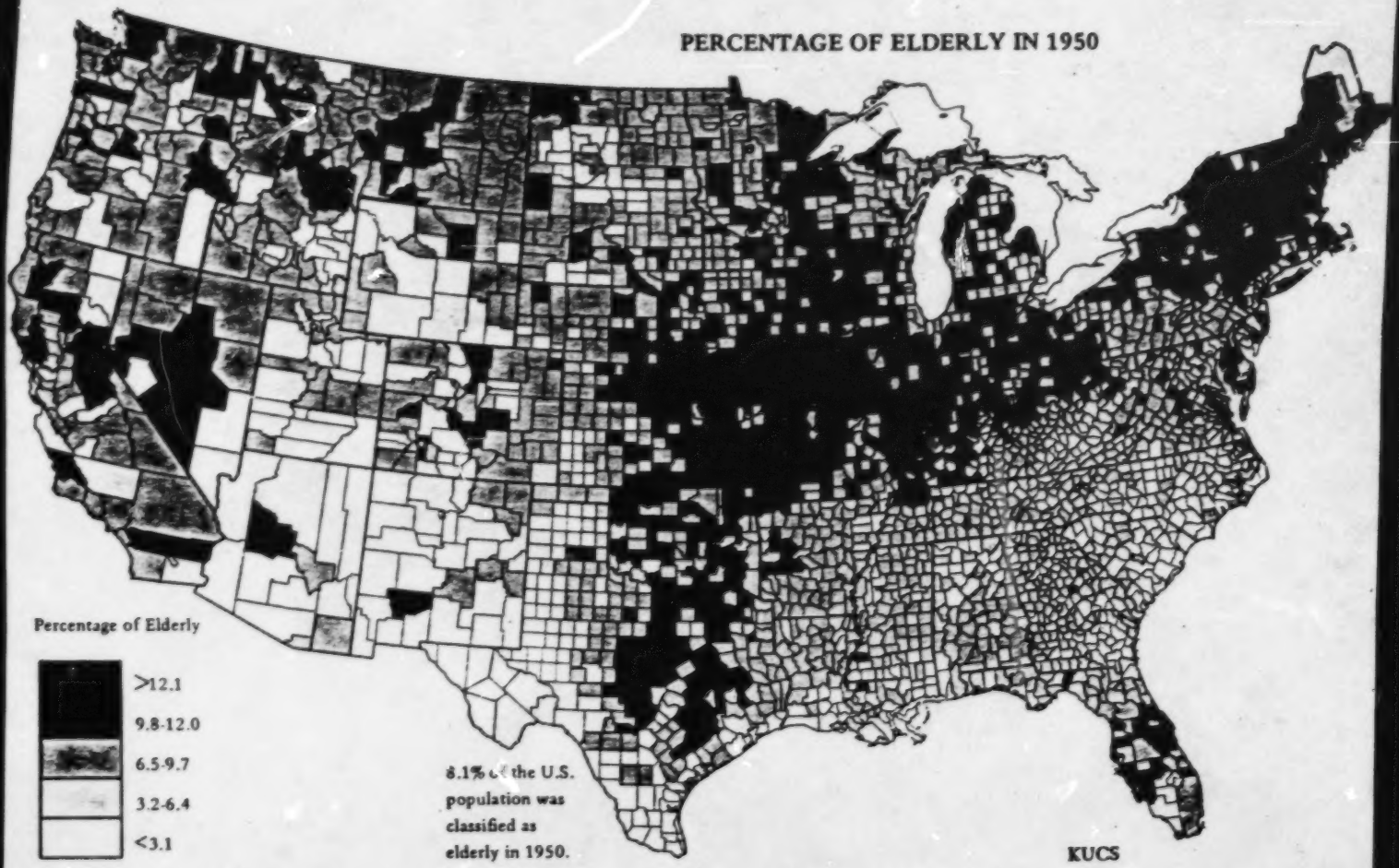
[6]A more contemporary period of county level data is available for 1975 from the Administration on Aging, Department of Health, Education and Welfare. It is not utilized here since it was developed from demographic estimates predicated upon the Census of Population of 1970.

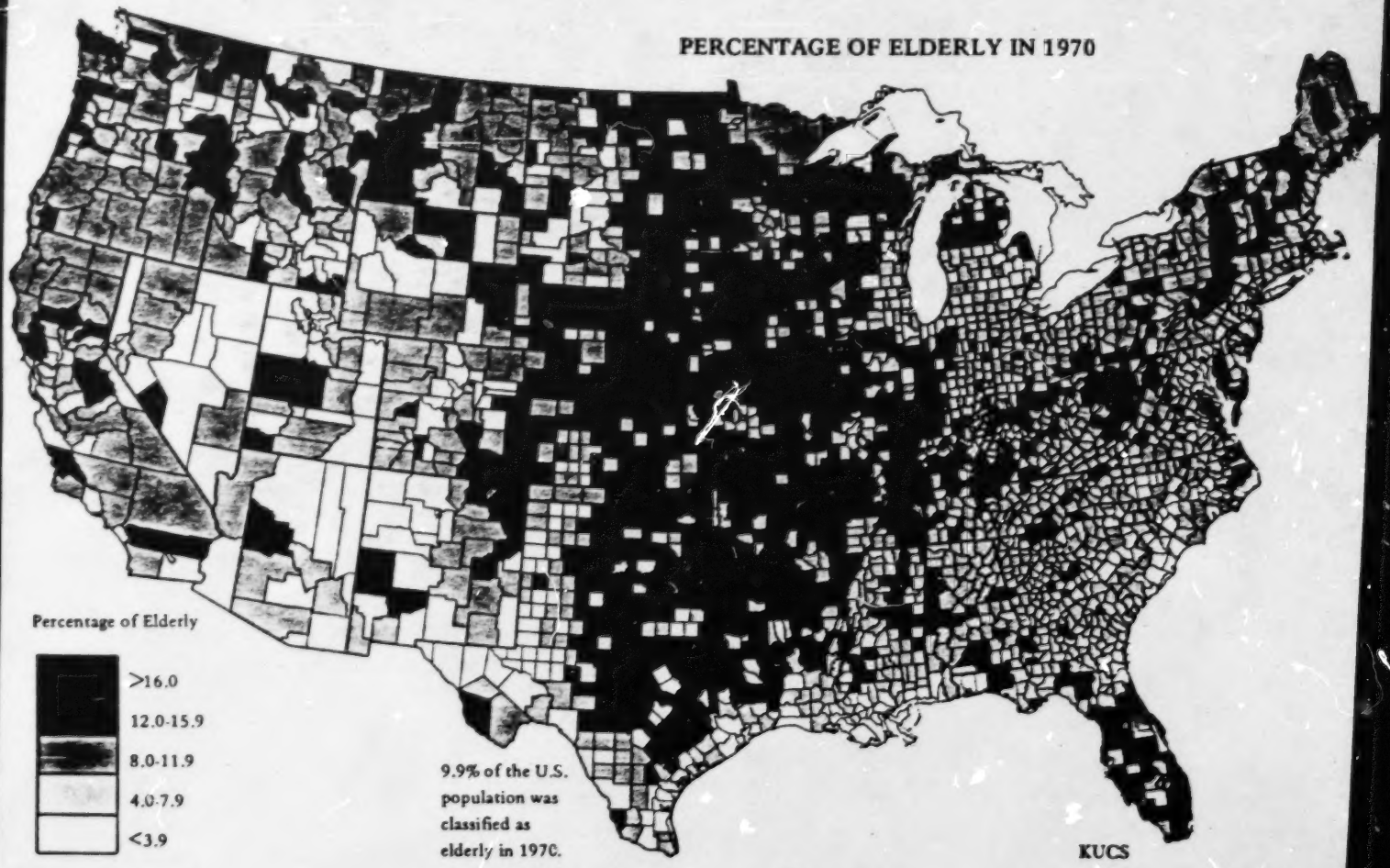
[7]The U. S. Bureau of the Census has published county based choroplethic maps for the distribution of elderly Americans (county percentages of persons aged 65 and older) for 1960 and 1970. However, the class intervals were not selected to display county percentages in relation to the national percentage. In this study the class intervals are constructed about the national percentage for each time period. Alaska and Hawaii are not included in this study since both became states during the study period, and both areas have exceedingly small numbers and percentages of elderly population.

[8]Between 1950 and 1970 the proportion of U.S. population classified as older increased 1.8 percentage points. In this analysis an increase of two times the national average, 3.6 percentage points, is considered notable.

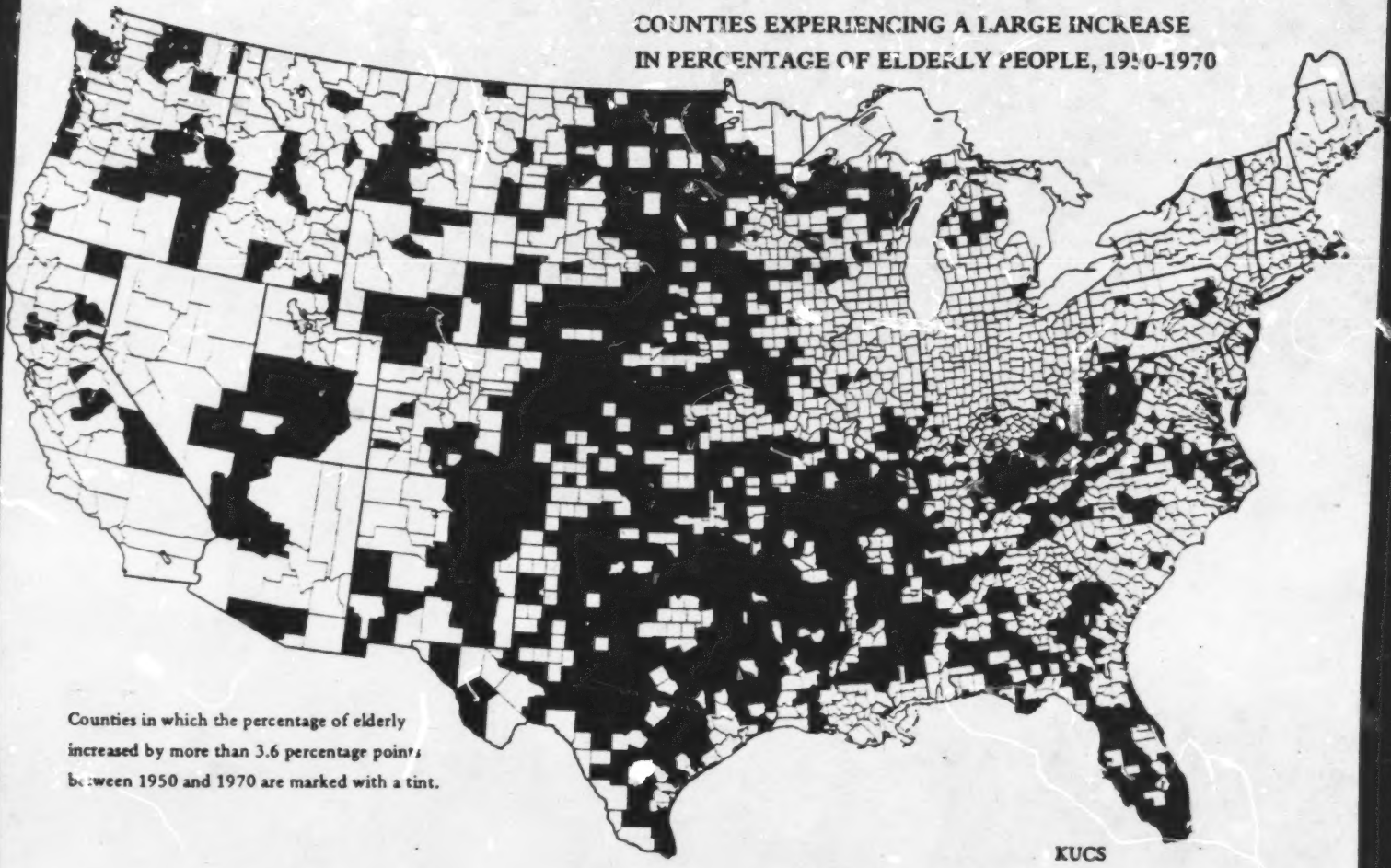
[9]Because of these selective migrations, most areas that have experienced stable or declining populations have relatively high proportions of elderly persons residing in rural areas and low proportions in urban areas. For example, the 1970 Census reported that in Kansas 14.3% of the rural population and 10.6% of the urban population were aged 65 and older. Similarly, states such as Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Nebraska, and the Dakotas had higher proportions of older persons residing in rural areas. Conversely, many states experiencing large in-migrations of persons seeking environmental amenities have high percentages of older persons residing in urban areas. For example, in Florida 14.9% of the urban population and 13.1% of the rural population were elderly. Similarly, Arizona, Connecticut, and California had higher percentages of elderly in urban rather than rural areas. These inverse processes have produced a national population with similar percentages of elderly residing in urban and rural areas. In 1970, 9.8% of U. S. urban population and 10.1% of the rural population were classified as aged.

[10]Frank A. Troutman: Retirees as Development Opportunity in the South (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, College of Business Administration, Univ. of Arkansas, Fayetteville, 1967).


PERCENTAGE OF ELDERLY IN 1950
Percentage of Elderly
>12.1
9.8-12.0
6.5-9.7
3.2-6.4
<3.1
8.1% of the U.S. population was classified as elderly in 1950.
KUCS


PERCENTAGE OF ELDERLY IN 1970
Percentage of Elderly
>16.0
12.0-15.9
8.0-11.9
4.0-7.9
<3.9
9.9% of the U.S. population was classified as elderly in 1970.
KUCS

COUNTIES EXPERIENCING A LARGE INCREASE IN PERCENTAGE OF ELDERLY PEOPLE, 1950-1970



Counties in which the percentage of elderly increased by more than 3.6 percentage points between 1950 and 1970 are marked with a tint.

KUCS